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ON THE DATE OF CHAUCER'S *ASTROLABE*

The date named in the two examples quoted below from Part II of Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, has generally been accepted as evidence that Chaucer wrote his treatise in 1391.¹ He says:

Ensample as thus; the yeer of oure lord 1391, the 12 day of March at midday, I wolde knowe the degree of the sonne. I soughte in the bak-half of myn Astrolabie, and fond the cercle of the dayes, etc.²

Ensample as thus: the yeer of oure lord 1391, the 12 day of March, I wold knowe the tyd of the day. I took the altitude of my sonne, and fond, etc.³

Chaucer's language, as Morley pointed out, obviously refers to a date in the past,⁴ and proves that this portion of the *Astrolabe* was written after March 12, 1391. Unless some other motive can be pointed out for Chaucer's selection of this particular year, it seems legitimate to infer that the March 12 immediately preceding the date at which he was writing was March 12, 1391.⁵ We must observe, however, that

¹ See, in addition to the references given by Miss Hammond, *Chaucer*, 360, the following: Skeat, *Student's Chaucer*, xv; Pollard, *Chaucer Primer*, 59; Pollard, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11 ed.), VI, 16; Emerson, *Poems of Chaucer*, xxvii; Ward, *Chaucer*, 107; etc. The only variations I have found from the date 1391 are those of Liddell, who assigns the work to "a late period of Chaucer's life" (*Globe Chaucer*, liii) and Pollard, who says "in or soon after 1391" (*Enc. Brit.*, *loc. cit.*). See, however, Wordsworth's remark quoted below, note 1, p. 204.

² Part II, sec. 1, ll. 4 ff.

³ Part II, sec. 3, ll. 10 ff.

⁴ Professor Skeat, after quoting Morley's observation that Chaucer's language precludes a date in the future, says: "Similarly, the expression 'I wolde knowe', in the former case, precludes a date in the *past*; and hence we are driven to conclude that the date refers to time present" (*Oxford Chaucer*, III, lxiv, n.). This argument I am unable to understand, especially as a few lines farther on Chaucer speaks of "the same night folwing." My attention was particularly drawn to this point by Professor Manly, who has also furnished me with other helpful suggestions in connection with this article.

⁵ There is always the possibility in cases of this kind that a date may have been chosen, not from the calendar of the current year, but from that of some other year, in order to obtain an example free from complexities of calculation. In the case of the examples we are considering it is easy to see why Chaucer selected such dates as March 12 and December 13 (Part II, sec. 1, l. 12). On these days the sun was in the first degrees of Aries and Capricorn, respectively (see context, and Skeat's footnote). But there is no apparent reason why Chaucer need have assigned these dates to a particular year. In fact it seems clear from the example that follows directly after the first of the two quoted above, that any year would have served his purpose, for he says: "Another day, I wolde knowe the degree of my sonne, and this was at midday in the 13 day of Decembre; I fond," etc. Since he does not assign this day to a definite year it would appear that the year was not material to the calculation. And if the year is immaterial for this example

this date would be, according to our reckoning, March 12, 1392. If, therefore, we accept this allusion as evidence of the date of the treatise, we ought to assign it to the year 1392, not 1391.¹

We are not justified, however, in assuming that Chaucer *began* his treatise in 1392, for it is by no means certain that he worked on it continuously. It is not without interest, therefore, to note that we have another piece of evidence which gives us a *terminus a quo* for the whole work. Chaucer says in his prologue that Part III of his treatise is to contain tables of longitudes and latitudes "and many another notable conclusioun, after the kalendres of the reverent clerkes, frere I. Somer and frere N. Lenne." Now Nicholas of Lynne's calendar, as he himself tells us in the preface to his work, was composed in 1386:

—ad petitionem et complacenciam illustrissimi principis domini Johannis, regis Castelle et Legionis, et ducis Lancastrie presens kalendarium Ego Frater Nicholaus de Leuca [sive Leuta], ord. B. M. Genitricis Dei de monte Carmeli, inter lectores sacre theologie minimus et indignus, composui anno

it is immaterial also for the example that precedes it, for both illustrate the same process. Professor Manly calls my attention to another example that Chaucer has evidently chosen for convenience of illustration. In his explanation of the hours of the planets Chaucer says: "Ensample as thus. The 13 day of March flil up-on a Saterdag per aventure, and, at the arising of the sonne, I fond," etc. (Part II, sec. 12, ll. 5 ff.). Chaucer's motive for choosing a Saturday is clear from Skeat's note on the passage, but there is no apparent reason for his choice of the date March 13, since any Saturday would have served. I see no reason, however, for inferring that March 13 fell on Saturday in the year Chaucer was writing, for the expression "per aventure" used in stating the example distinctly suggests that it may be a hypothetical one. March 13 fell on Saturday in the years 1389 and 1395, but in view of the phraseology in which the example is stated I attach no significance to the date chosen.

¹ Objection may possibly be made to this argument on the ground that Nicholas of Lynne begins the year with January 1 (see passage quoted below), and that Chaucer may have reckoned in the same way. But the two cases are not identical. We are able to infer from the language of Nicholas of Lynne that he begins the year with January 1, so that there is no ambiguity in his date. And since his calendar was, in part, an ecclesiastical calendar, it is not surprising that he should have followed the Roman practice in this matter. But since Chaucer gives us no indication that he is not following the ordinary practice, we naturally assume that he is reckoning according to the legal year, which began March 25. If this was *not* what he intended the date he gave was ambiguous, if not misleading. We may note in this connection that when Osbern Bokenham gives a date according to the Roman calendar he tells us he is reckoning in that way:

The yer of grace, pleynly to descryue,
A thowsand fourhundryd fourty & fyue
Aftyr þe cherche of Romys computacyoun,
Wyth wyth Jane chaungyth hyr calculacyoun.
(*Legenden*, ed. Horstmann, p. 126, ll. 1-4.)

Finally, I ought to call attention to the remark of Wordsworth, in his *Ancient Kalendar of the University of Oxford*, p. 13, n.: "Chaucer gives two examples, calculated for March 12, 1391-2, which may therefore be reasonably taken as the date when he was writing his Treatise on the Astrolabe."

eiusdem Domini nostri Jhesu Christi 1386 pro quatuor ciclis decennovenalibus immediate sequentibus: et incipiet istud kalendarium terminato kalendario reverendi magistri Walteri Elwedene, videlicet anno Christi 1387 primo die mensis Januarii prima currente per unum.¹ Et durabit per 76 annos videlicet usque ad annum Domini 1463.²

The Prologue to the *Astrolabe*, therefore, cannot have been written before 1387. The fact that the treatise is incomplete, containing but two of the five parts promised in the Prologue, is evidence that this prologue was written before the work it introduces. We may therefore accept the year 1387 as a reliable *terminus a quo* for the Prologue and Part I of the *Astrolabe*.³ It is highly probable, however, that Part II (or at least the former portion of it) was written in 1392.

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¹ MS Rawlinson C 895 (for reference see note 2) has "luna currente per I."

² *Catal. Codd. MSS Bib. Bodl.*, Pars II, fasc. 1, col. 480, *sub* Laud MS 662. For proof of the identity of Nicholas of Lynne and Nicholaus de Leuca see *Catalogue of the Ashmolean MSS*, col. 4, *sub* MS 5. This MS of the calendar, which begins with the preface from which I am here quoting, ends with: "Explicit Kalendarium [fratris] Nicholai de Linea." See also *sub* MS Rawlinson C 895, *Catal. Codd. MSS Bib. Bodl.*, Pars V, fasc. 2, coll. 467, 468. Since this calendar was made for the Duke of Lancaster, we may perhaps have in Chaucer's use of it another trace of his connection with John of Gaunt.

³ Professor Skeat suggests, in connection with the Cecilia Chaumpaigne episode, the possibility that the "raptus" may be "connected with the fact that his 'little son Lewis' was ten years old in 1391, as we learn from the Prologue to the Treatise on the *Astrolabe*" (*Oxford Chaucer*, I, xxxiii). This hypothesis is not rendered untenable by the conclusions I have tried to establish in the present article. But these conclusions deprive Professor Skeat's hypothesis of whatever corroboration it derived from the correspondence of the dates 1380 and 1391 with the age of his "son." It is still a possibility that the Prologue was written in 1391, but this is an assumption, inasmuch as that date is no more probable than any other date between 1387 and 1392.